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CRIME TV'S UNDERCOVER HALLOWEEN

ABSTRACT

In order to interrogate patterns of seasonal television, this article looks at Halloween themed episodes of long-running American crime television programmes such as *CSI*, *Bones* and, in particular, *Criminal Minds*. It argues that Halloween on crime TV is predictably transgressive – offering conventional fantasies of masquerade and consumption, rather than subversive challenges to the genre's status quo. On crime television, Halloween has harnessed the logic of the urban legend to present nostalgic visions of a festival which has become fundamentally televisual in nature. The thematic underpinnings of this televisual holiday are anxieties around children in public space and the ritual re-imagining of the risks they face when celebrating Halloween.

KEYWORDS:

crime television

Halloween

hyperreality

nostalgia

serial killer

‘The question is: where does the fake blood end and the real begin?’

– Nick Stokes, *CSI* (season 8, episode 5)

Like CBS’s long running serial killer programme *Criminal Minds* (2005-), this essay begins with a thematically linked epigraph. Where the fictional Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU) are careful to choose their extra diegetic quotations from an archive of aphorisms by well-respected historical figures, I begin my exploration of televisual Halloween with Las Vegas criminalist Nick Stokes’ (George Eads) musing at a crime scene on the set of a low budget horror film. Nick’s soundbite sets the stage for this article’s central concerns: the framing of contemporary Halloween on television as a pleasurable dark scrapbook of hyperreality that mixes the fake blood with the real, delighting in the erosion of distinction between the two. It is a patchwork event steeped in nostalgia, promising fluid identity play but frequently offering persuasive reconfirmations of consumerism instead. Through an analysis of Halloween episodes broadcast on mainstream American crime television, this article argues that postmodern Halloween is fundamentally televisual in nature and best understood as the perfect medium for the transmission of a potent fusion of urban legend and media panic. At Nick’s crime scene, fake corpses that belong to the film set hide the actual body of the murder victim and he must forensically distinguish between the real and the fake. On crime TV’s Halloween, however, all of the bodies and the blood are simulations. Thus Nick’s question is always already irrelevant, making Halloween a televisual occasion to celebrate the hyperreal, the Gothic and to liberally employ the framework of the forensic to structure the spectacles belonging to both.

Although Halloween specials are common across broadcast television, this article zeroes in on those episodes aired as part of long running American crime television programmes (such as *CSI* [2000-2015], *Castle* [2009-], *Bones* [2005-], and, in particular, *Criminal Minds*). These shows are structured using relatively traditional patterns of network

TV – the episodes are largely self-contained and rely on a ‘ripped from the headlines’ topicality and forensic realism to construct their murder puzzles. Crime TV has a successful history of exploiting a sense of urban risk and Gothic pathology – the figure of the serial killer is illustrative here – which dovetails nicely with cultural associations of Halloween as time of heightened danger, whether from human or supernatural monsters. The following exchange from *Castle* (‘Vampire Weekend’) exemplifies crime TV’s use of Halloween iconography:

Castle (Nathan Fillion): I just love this time of year – the crunchy leaves under foot, the crisp clean air, the smell of jack-o-lanterns all aflame.

Beckett (Stana Katic): Yeah, well, you wouldn’t say that if you were a cop. Halloween is one of the worst weeks of the year for us.

In the urban reality of American crime television, Halloween provides more opportunities to commit and conceal crimes. It also intensifies the nature of those crimes – they are more gruesome, more ritualized and often tied to the occult. These particularly horrific crimes are also solved against a backdrop of seasonal nostalgia (as *Castle*’s statement indicates), which gives professional adults the opportunity to dress up and indulge their childhood or adult fantasies. Crime TV feeds the opposing forces of contemporary Halloween. In one direction it exploits a powerful childhood nostalgia (play, costume, candy, trick-or-treating); in the other direction it resurrects the horrific monsters that are part of the arsenal of childhood fears and, significantly, contemporary fears around children (the vampire, the zombie, the candy poisoning serial killer, and the paedophile).

At first glance Halloween episodes offer a kind of burlesque in which the conventions of long running series are put on hiatus in favour of spectacular rituals of masking and

unmasking. The audience gets to see characters, often law enforcement or scientific professionals, in uncharacteristically revealing costumes as they face surreal or even supernatural investigations. These uncanny situations and costumes reveal hidden desires and fears. Characters are shown literally wearing their fantasies, whether this is Richard Castle dressed as Edgar Allen Poe or Temperance Brennan (Emily Deschanel) as Wonder Woman (see figure 1 below).



Figure 1: Brennan and Booth in Costume in 'Mummy in the Maze'

Significantly, the fantasies and repressions belonging to a variety of different characters are often strikingly similar (the same childhood nostalgia or trauma, unrequited workplace love, popular culture fandom, etc.). Halloween episodes are themselves conventional, particularly on crime shows. Much like typical Christmas episodes (e.g. those that are inspired by Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*), or even standard tropes such as amnesia-based narratives or undercover assignments, Halloween episodes are predictably transgressive across the genre. They fold in established Halloween iconography (e.g. the inclusion of

supernatural elements) and push at, rather than break, the boundaries of characterization by showing the more childish side of serious characters, such as Temperance Brennan.

These episodes are less as Mikhail Bakhtin described the carnivalesque, in which the laws of the status quo are inverted for a short period of time, and function more as Svetlana Boym's (2001) formulation of a particularly American restorative nostalgia. Boym defines nostalgia as 'a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values' (2001: 8). She establishes it as an intersection of individual and communal longing for the experience of childhood and a 'romance with one's own fantasy' (2001: xiii). In the structure of the Halloween episode we see all of these realizations of nostalgia – from the emphasis on the festival's importance to children, to the shared desire of adult characters to revivify their lost childhood experience of wonder *and* participation in consumer popular culture. I would argue that crime television floats on the sliding scale between Boym's restorative and reflective modes of nostalgia. In many ways, these crime television episodes are straightforwardly restorative in their attempts to collapse notions of historical time in order to return to an idealized past. In this case, such erasure simultaneously recalls childhood initiation into consumerism coupled with the American manufacture of a European seasonal festival deracinated from its religious or social contexts and grafted onto a generalized sense of the Gothic and playful masquerade. It is using the filter of nostalgia that I chart Halloween's history, not as an evolution but as a mapping of the bricolage American culture uses to re-invent historical European iconography.

It is through such excesses – of hyperreality and intertextuality – that Halloween episodes celebrate not just the festival itself, but the experience of *longing* for those Halloween memories. Thus, their mode draws from Boym's more reflective version of

nostalgia and taps into a more subversive or carnivalesque potential in the celebration and expression of Halloween – on television and beyond. In mapping the evolution of Halloween Nicholas Rogers argues that it:

[...] has managed to retain the revelrous liminality that was characteristic of many festivals in the past. Halloween constitutes a time of transition when orthodox social constraints are lifted, a moment of status ambiguity and indeterminacy when ritual subjects can act out their individual or collective fantasies, hopes, or anxieties. As such Halloween has an intoxicating and sometimes spontaneous ludic quality that distinguishes it from the largely spectatorial, mass-produced culture and more institutionalized commemorations. (1993: 463)

On crime television, in particular, Halloween offers a generally unrealized possibility of revelrous subversion simmering just below the surface. I argue that American Halloween is best understood as a kind of hyperreal urban legend, whose re-tellings, co-options, and repetitions produce meanings that are fluid and challenge fixed notions of hierarchies of knowledge, religious practice and historical traditions. As Ellen Feldman argues, ‘Halloween is a plastic holiday [...] [and] could be mauled and molded to fit the needs of each generation’ (2001). Jack Santino agrees pointing out that ‘[t]o say that Halloween is polysemic is an understatement’ (2009: 10). The hyperreal urban legend of Halloween hovers between delight and horror, revealing the instability and ambiguity of nostalgia. It confirms the importance of television in expressing and playing with notions of the self – for example through TV-inspired consuming (Lynda Carter’s Wonder Woman appears frequently) and in constructing Halloween as the child’s entrance into consumer culture. If, as Feldman argues, Halloween is what we need it to be, then crime TV’s Halloween is an

expression of contemporary Western culture's anxieties around parenting, urban risk and childhood.

SERIAL KILLERS AND URBAN LEGENDS: THE PATCHWORK HISTORY OF HALLOWEEN

To call Halloween hyperreal is to be simultaneously obvious and controversial. Similarly, to map the evolution of Halloween as a Celtic harvest festival into a consumerist bacchanalia is to present something that occupies the same tense space between the straightforward and the contentious. Histories of Halloween emphasize its origins in the Celtic celebration of Samhain (pronounced Sa-ween), which was celebrated in the autumn as a harvest festival to mark the beginning of the winter often with feasting, courtship rituals and bonfires.¹ Stephen Sayers argues that while contemporary folklorists are deeply sceptical of a 'new age' tendency to co-opt the ancient roots of festivals like Samhain in order to make overly simple cross cultural universalising connections (2009: 20-21), it is clear that Halloween does have concrete roots in pre-Christian harvest festivals like Samhain and the Roman feast of Pomona. Significant here is Samhain's status as a festival of borders and liminality and as a 'time of supernatural intensity heralding the onset of winter' (Rogers 2002: 19). Despite more recent connections of Halloween with Satanism, it was Christianity that ensured the longevity of Samhain and its transfiguration into Halloween, coupled with All Souls' and All Saints' Days.

¹ For a comprehensive history of Halloween see Nicholas Rogers (2002) and Malcolm Foley and Hugh O'Donnell's edited collection *Treat or Trick? Halloween in a Globalising World* (2009). In the 'Devil's Night' episode of *Criminal Minds* Dr. Spencer Reid also provides a precise summary of the journey of Halloween from its Celtic roots as Samhain to its American consumerist celebration.

Whether firmly grounded in the historical record or merely part of reclaimed and re-purposed mythology, Halloween travels from the fire rites of Samhain through Roman feasting, Christian liturgies to the more family-centred parlour games of the Victorian era, complete with romantic divinations and socially sanctioned adolescent mischief-making. I argue that Halloween, as it is currently understood and celebrated (as a time of criminal intensity heralding the heightened risk to children), begins in the 1980s with a series of crime related media panics. My history of Halloween is not a comprehensive map of its practices and migrations; such useful studies exist elsewhere – for example Nicholas Rogers' (2002) thorough work on the subject matter. Rather, it zeroes in on a (televisually informed) moment in 1980s America in which the structure of the urban legend became a transnational delivery system bringing a nostalgic American articulation of Halloween to the world.

In the 1980s there was a pervasive panic around the belief that people were systematically poisoning Halloween candy. But as Joel Best (1985; 1986) and Gerald T. Horiuchi (1985) point out, these spree poisoners were an exaggerated force – often confused with the well-publicized Tylenol tampering case of 1982 and with two specific cases in which children were killed at Halloween. In one case a boy's candy was poisoned by his father and in another, a boy overdosed on his uncle's drugs (Rogers 2002: 90-91). Halloween candy tampering was often tied to the occult, causing some American Christian agencies to condemn Halloween as a facilitator for Satanism and discourage the practice of trick-or-treating. However, I would argue that the black hole at the centre of these Halloween scares was not a religious idea of evil, but one that was forensically (in)formed – the serial killer.

Nicholas Rogers also highlights this connection between the urban legend of Halloween Satanism and the mythology of serial murder. He points out, '[c]oncurrent with the growing fear that Halloween was becoming a macabre festival of sadistic acts was the

public fascination with serial killers’ (Rogers 2002: 122). Like the candy tampering scares, the serial killer is a media invention of the 1980s.² The fusion of candy poisoning and serial murder forms an enduring urban legend framing the perils facing children journeying into public spaces at Halloween. This is the Halloween propagated on crime TV – an urban legend steeped in forensic realism. Jan Harold Brunvand suggests that ‘[urban l]egends survive by being as lively and “factual” as the television evening news, and, like the daily news broadcasts, they tend to concern deaths, injuries, kidnappings, tragedies, and scandals’ (Brunvand 1981: 11). On contemporary crime programming like *Criminal Minds*, the TV news and the salacious urban legend are inextricable, particularly at Halloween. I contend that, since the 1980s, TV has become not only the perfect medium for expressing Halloween’s iconography and preoccupations, but that Halloween itself has become televisual. TV provides the architectural support for postmodern fantasies of Halloween – both the nostalgic and the horrific.

THE GHOSTS OF BROADCASTING PAST: HALLOWEEN ON TV; HALLOWEEN AS TV

Seasonal television is a product of traditional broadcast television and in the many Halloween episodes aired since the 1970s we can read the spectre of older viewing patterns haunting television as it moves from the era of video recorders to the multi-platform digital age. To continue with this seasonally appropriate Gothic metaphor, I would argue that the rumours of the death of traditional weekly TV viewing patterns (due to the availability of box sets and ‘on demand’ services) are exaggerated – or, perhaps, broadcast-based viewing patterns are like undead zombies that refuse to die. Television’s seasonality remains a significant part of

² For more information on the media invention of the serial killer and behavioural science, see Mark Seltzer (1998), David Schmid (2005) and Lindsay Steenberg (2013).

the pleasure of its viewership, particularly among under-theorized demographic categories, such as those aged over 65 who represent a significant group of TV consumers.

Halloween episodes take place at a distinctive time in the broadcast lifespan of a TV show – they are generally the fourth to seventh episode in a season. They take place after the major reversals and revelations of the cliff-hanger episodes that mark the beginning and end of the summer break. Thus the Halloween episode must do the work of (re)establishing the status quo of the series, and setting the tone, and the characterizations of its upcoming season. Importantly, it must also support a murder plot which can stand alone in order for it to attain a healthy afterlife in the syndication of future Halloweens. *Criminal Minds*' second season Halloween themed episode sees Elle Greenaway (Lola Glaudini) struggling to mentally recover from being shot during the first season finale. She is also under investigation for killing a suspected serial murderer. Elle's struggle to come to terms with her violent attack forms the main subplot of the episode, which ultimately sees her character leaving the series. Additional *Criminal Minds* Halloween episodes see other female profilers being integrated into the team, for example 'The Good Earth' has linguist Alex Blake (Jeanne Tripplehorn) gain her new teammates' approval, and 'Boxed In' is early in the first season of Kate Callaghan's (Jennifer Love Hewitt) brief tenure with the BAU. These episodes are important milestones in setting up team dynamics for the season, particularly as the main female position in the show's 'work family' has been played by so many different actresses over the series' decade long run.

The position of the Halloween episode in the season reinforces that notion that Halloween episodes do not represent reversals or unmaskings, but rather use Halloween iconography and narratives to re-confirm the status quo. Elle may have left the show permanently in the second season Halloween episode, but she is replaced by a succession of other female character in later seasons in much the same way that the long running

procedural *Law and Order* (1990-2010) frequently replaced its female Assistant District Attorneys.³ This pattern (that balances between major changes and series status quo) provides insight into wider shifts in the narrative patterns of contemporary crime TV – that is, they tap into certain elements of what Jason Mittell (2015) has labelled ‘complex TV’, which describes a new mode of television narrative. Elements forming part of this kind of complex televisual storytelling include layered character development and complicated serialized plotlines. Mittell emphasizes the difficult balance that must be struck between long and short term story arcs. The crime programmes described here borrow some aspects of complex TV but maintain a balance more heavily weighted towards traditional broadcast patterns of television procedurals, including insular, one-off episodes perfectly suited to syndication. Though borrowing heavily from its toolkit, network crime television can be seen as a kind of rejection of complex TV, and therein lies its ability to produce seasonal episodes so effectively.

Broadcast television is arguably one of the most significant ways in which Western culture marks the changing of the seasons. Given that climate controlled supermarkets stock produce from a near constant global harvest, Western cultures no longer depend upon their local weather systems and harvests to dictate schedules of consumption. The labour patterns (e.g. migrant harvest workers) that formed a key part of the feasting in the autumn in pre-industrial times (e.g. during festivals such as St Martinmas in early November) are no longer the same under hyper-urbanized global capitalism. Television is an intimate domestic medium, located where the family hearth once stood. It also functions as a virtual village

³ There is not space in this article to unpack the gender politics of this unsettling tendency to figure female investigators as interchangeable. However, it must be flagged up as problematic.

green around which Western communities gather to celebrate. Pushing this metaphor further, I would argue that Halloween TV becomes a hyperreal bonfire marking the passing of the harvest season, and that consumer culture depends on its hyperreal televisual seasonality for many of its rituals, taught to viewers through a combination of advertisement directives and serial narratives.

MAPPING THE MONSTERS: A BRIEF TAXONOMY OF HALLOWEEN

EPISODES

From these larger scale nostalgic histories of Halloween and its broadcast life on television a functional, if not comprehensive, taxonomy of Halloween crime TV programming can be sketched out. From mid-October to early November, there are a variety of Halloween themed programmes offered on US broadcast television from one-off Halloween specials such as *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown* (1966) and *Halloween is Grinch Night* (1977) to the airing of horror films such as Universal's 1930s monster cycle (including *Frankenstein* [Whale, 1931], *The Mummy* [Freund, 1932] and *Dracula* [Browning, 1931]) and more recent films such as the *Halloween* slasher franchise and zombie films such as *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968). Some of these films are explicitly set during Halloween (*Halloween* [Carpenter, 1978], *The Nightmare Before Christmas* [Burton, 1993]) while most are connected to the season exclusively through their classification as horror films. Perhaps the most influential example of the Halloween one-off special was the radio broadcast on 30 October 1938 when the Mercury Theatre's Orson Welles set out to fool the nation with *War of the Worlds*. Welles finished the programme by claiming the show was meant as a radio equivalent of dressing in a sheet and yelling boo. His concluding line about sinister visitors describes trick-or-treaters rather than invaders: 'that was no Martian. It's Halloween'. Like the many other Halloween urban legends that will be analysed later in this article (e.g. the

candy tampering scare of the 1980s), the mass panic surrounding Welles' broadcast was an exaggeration largely manufactured through media reports.

On serial television, there is a well-established tradition of offering a Halloween themed or set episode – which can be seen at least as early as *The Honeymooners* episode 'Halloween Party' broadcast on 31 October 1953 and 'Halloween Party for the Boss' which aired the following year. Sitcoms such as *Roseanne* (1988-1997) and *Home Improvement* (1991-1999) featured yearly Halloween episodes, as did many other shows and genres on television from the soap opera to the Halloween decorated sets of talk shows. Arguably, it is *The Simpsons*' 'Treehouse of Horror' (1989-) episodes that have become the most enduring sitcom Halloween offerings. These types of episodes provide the opportunity for playful masquerades and set dressing to celebrate the season, but stop just shy of any major or permanent reversals. The status quo is always re-established by the end of the episode or the beginning of the subsequent one, and November aired programming delivers what audiences have come to expect of the shows. Thus, the episodic logic of the Halloween episode invented a time-bounded space to play with other genres or performance styles without permanent consequences.

Crime television follows a similar pattern as its comedic counterparts, airing Halloween episodes which exploit the holiday's associations with costuming and masking; its entanglement with horror cinema and the Gothic; and its particular association with adolescence and liminality. Using broad brushstrokes, there are three distinct types of Halloween episodes on crime television: the Halloween Dependant episode, the Halloween Set episode and the Urban Legend or Gothic episode.

Halloween Dependant

The first is the fully Halloween Dependant episode, which is explicitly set during Halloween and features a central crime that requires the holiday for its commission and/or concealment.

An illustrative example of this is the *Bones* episode ‘Mummy in the Maze’, which follows the investigation into the murder and mummification of a teenage girl, whose body is found in a Halloween themed corn maze. Not only does the episode feature all the background iconography of Halloween, including a Church-run Hell House (see figure 2 below) and mandatory Halloween costumes for the main cast of forensic investigators, but its central crime is seasonal.



Figure 2: The Hell House explained in 'Mummy in the Maze'

In this episode, a serial killing paramedic(with unclear motives) uses Halloween as an opportunity to prey on wounded teenage girls who have been the victims of a teenaged couple’s sadistic sexual role-playing. The murderer then drugs, tortures, and kills the young girls using what they most fear (e.g. spiders, snakes, or claustrophobic spaces). Another example is *Criminal Minds*’ ‘Devil’s Night’, which features a Detroit based serial killer who only kills and burns his victims during the few days around Halloween. The killer uses

Detroit's history of Halloween arson to conceal his crimes. Both these Halloween episodes imagine serial killers whose *modus operandi* require Halloween and, like other Halloween Dependant episodes, tap into Halloween's importance as a time of adolescent mischief and the concomitant parental fears around their children's behaviour and safety during the rituals of Halloween.

Halloween Set

The second type of episode is set during the Halloween season, but does not feature an explicitly Halloween related crime. While the crimes in these episodes are generally more horrific than usual (and, perhaps, more aesthetically informed by horror film conventions) they do not depend upon the season for their killer's pathology. In these episodes Halloween is generally part of a more personal sub-plot belonging to established characters. The *Criminal Minds* episode 'The Good Earth' is representative. It features a female serial killer who collects physically fit men in order to turn them into fertilizer for her tomato farm; the fruit of which she believes can cure her daughter's imagined illness (see figure 3 below).



Figure 3: A female serial killer captures and butchers young men in 'Boxed In'

This plot is particularly gruesome, even for a programme that features weekly serial murder, but it does not require Halloween to tell its story. These narratives, however, do give a 'Halloween treatment' to contemporary fears by raising the stakes on widely circulating anxieties and rendering their possible outcomes more gruesome or Gothic. For example, 'The Good Earth' demonizes the organic food craze by making a middle aged, middle class woman homicidal (and cannibalistic) in her commitment to organic farming and holistic healing. In an earlier Halloween dependant episode, entitled 'In the Blood', a man's research into his ancestry turns horrific, as he over-identifies with his witch-burning ancestor and becomes a serial killer known by the BAU as a 'moral vigilante' who kidnaps women and burns them as witches. The plot of this episode invents a Gothic outcome to current trends into ancestry research, as expressed in television shows such as *Who Do You Think You Are?* (2010-).

In the Halloween set episode, the festival generally forms the mainstay of the personal sub-plot running parallel to the murder investigation, as in 'The Good Earth', in which the Halloween sub-plot follows Agent JJ Jareau's (A.J. Cook) son Henry's fear of Halloween. JJ explains to her team that Henry does not want to trick-or-treat because he overheard her discussing the unending number of 'monsters' she fights as part of her job. Henry ultimately gets over his fears and dresses as JJ's colleague Spencer Reid (Matthew Gray Gubler) to go trick-or-treating because he is a profiler and it is his job to fight monsters. As with all categories of Halloween episodes, the anxieties and perils of postmodern parenting are centralized, as is the place of Halloween in raising happy children.

Urban Legend and the Gothic

Like the previous two categories, the final category (the Gothic or urban legend episode) includes episodes aired at or around Halloween. Unlike the previous categories it does not mention Halloween at all. Rather, these episodes are built around themes associated with Halloween such as the supernatural or the Gothic (the *Castle* episode 'Demons' focuses on a ghost hunter found dead in a mysterious mansion with secret compartments) or based around an urban legend or horror film (*CSI:NY*'s 'Boo' is based on homicidal houses such as the one featured in *The Amityville Horror* [Rosenberg, 1979]).

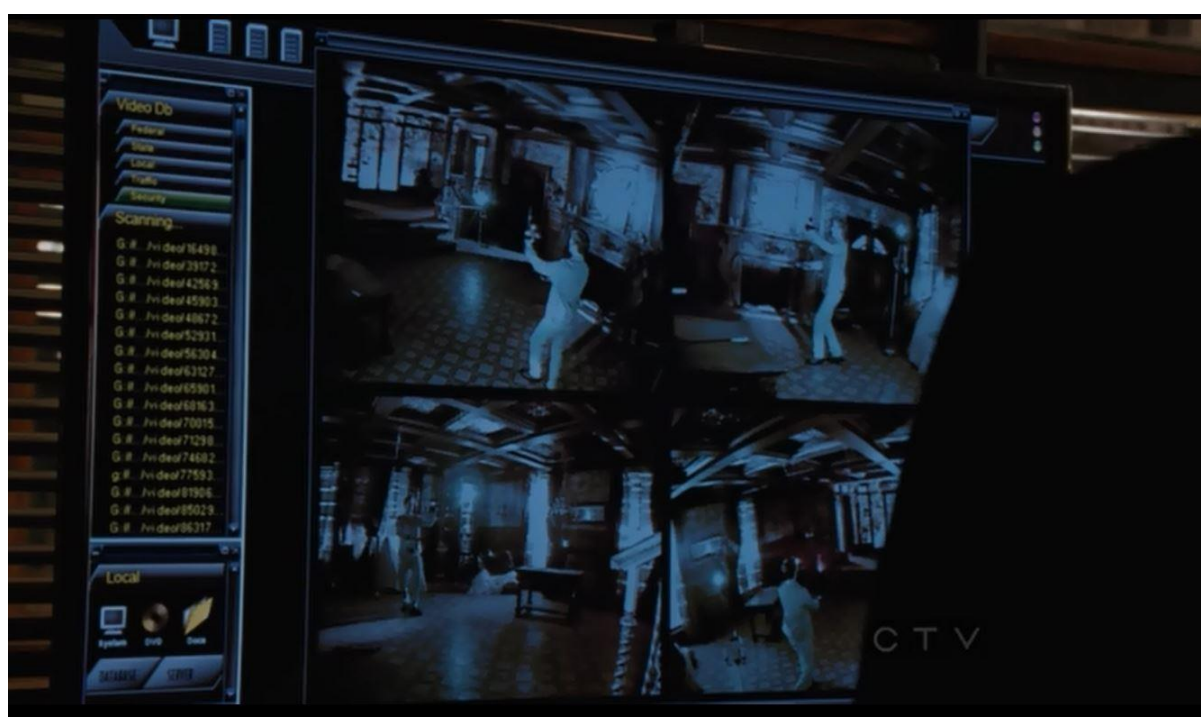


Figure 4: Castle and Beckett investigate the murder of a reality television show host in 'Demons'

The episodes are significant in that they reveal the kinds of elements that have come to be associated with postmodern Halloween, but are absent from its pre-industrial history.

Nicholas Rogers argues that the connection between horror films and their monsters (such as zombies, vampires and Frankenstein's monster) is quite recent. Even at the height of Universal's 1930s horror cycle, 'there is no evidence that it [the horror genre] was closely linked to Halloween in the manner it is today' (Rogers 2002: 105-106). Rogers goes on to explain that the rise in popularity of horror stories, especially in comics, was not tied in any

particular way to the seasonality of Halloween. He concludes that: ‘It was in the 1970s and beyond that horror really became the dominant cinematic genre at Halloween’ (2002: 208) and this was largely due to the retrospectives in revue cinemas and, more significantly, to TV networks airing classical era horror films. It is important to emphasize the critical role that television had in cementing the association between horror, and its longer cinematic history, with Halloween. Furthermore, the role of broadcast television is central in manufacturing a particularly American version of nostalgia, hinging on childhood memories of seasonal viewership.

Looking to Raymond Williams’ (2010) influential concept of televisual flow, the post 1970s October television schedule is packed with monsters that have become associated with Halloween due to their televisual proximity rather than any associations with historical celebratory traditions. Here, as elsewhere, Halloween depends on television for its currency beyond the medium. Halloween specific advertisements (e.g. the early 1990s saw a zombie themed Captain Crunch breakfast cereal advert and a McDonald’s advertisement in which ‘Chicken McNuggets’ are dressed as Universal’s iconic monsters) also contribute to the ‘flow’ of Halloween programming providing the mortar to bind blocks of programming around a sense of seasonality. It is within this structure that crime television began airing Halloween episodes, such as *Hunter*’s (1984-1991) ‘Killer in a Halloween Mask’ in 1985 and *21 Jump Street*’s (1987-1991) ‘Old Haunts in a New Age’ in 1989.

Halloween is a recurring and under theorized fixture of crime television. While brief and serviceable, the above catalogue of crime television’s Halloween episodes represents the first step in addressing the absence of analysis on the intersection between crime television (with its coupling of stories of urban danger with authoritative reassurance/investigative resolution) and the hyperreal spectacles of Halloween (which undermine and blur distinctions between the violence of the news and those of the urban legend). What is evident from this

lexicon of Halloween television is the importance of TV as a medium in cementing our associations of Halloween as a time of masquerade; for focalizing the Gothic as a lens through which to view contemporary violence and risk; and the absolute primacy of pop-cultural/cinematic inter-textuality to contemporary celebrations of the holiday and to its marketability.⁴

REVENGE OF THE CHILDREN: POSTMODERN PARENTING AT HALLOWEEN

Crime programming at Halloween is uniquely positioned to harness the narrative logic of the urban legend to worry over the safety of children. Consider the case of the urban legend entitled ‘the lone babysitter’ made famous by the parodic film *Scream* (Craven, 1996): the teenaged babysitter receives several phone calls in which a sinister voice whispers, ‘Watch the children!’ The horrific twist of the story is that the phone call is coming from inside the house. The main thematic obsession on crime television’s Halloween episodes is not ghosts or the supernatural but anxieties around contemporary parenting. While many Halloween plots feature children or teens as victims, this section concentrates on two parental anxieties specific to crime TV: those around children as perpetrators and those around fatherhood.

⁴ According to the National Retail Federation (2001) costumes are a multi-billion-dollar industry – with Americans expected to spend \$2.5 billion dollars on costumes that year (Alexander 2014: 184). Ellen Feldman reports that Americans spend a total of 6 billion dollars on the holiday, as of 2001 when the article was written, with almost 2 billion being reserved for candy (2001). She goes on to report that sales for Coors beer jump 10 per cent at Halloween and that seasonal sales for Oreos with orange fillings increased by 50 per cent during the lead up to Halloween. Only Christmas is more economically profitable than Halloween, which has seen a dramatic rise in merchandising in the last forty years (Rogers 2002: 6).

The tension between good and bad fathers, a thematic undercurrent to crime television in general, is exacerbated across all types of Halloween episodes – as children are threatened not only by monstrous adult assailants but by the influence of bad or weak fathers (e.g. *Criminal Minds*’ ‘Boxed In’ and *Castle*’s ‘Vampire Weekend’).

‘There is nothing funny about Halloween’, argues Jean Baudrillard in *America* (1999), his travelogue/meditation on American culture. This statement is the opening epigraph to *Criminal Minds*’ Halloween Dependant episode ‘Boxed In’ that follows the transformation of an abused child into a child abuser. Baudrillard continues his condemnation of American Halloween:

This sarcastic festival reflects, rather, an infernal demand for revenge by children on the adult world. The threat from this evil force hangs over adults here, equal in intensity only to their devotion to children. There is nothing more unhealthy than this childish sorcery, behind all the dressing up and the presents – people turn out their lights and hide, for fear of harassment. And it is no accident that some of them stick needles or razor blades into the apples or cookies they hand out to the children. (1999: 48-49)

Here Baudrillard, in a typically contentious aphorism, frames Halloween as a revenge of children on the adult world that both loves and fears them, and secretly desires to poison them. It is fitting that Baudrillard follows his condemnation of Halloween with an equally passionate condemnation of the sinister laugh track integral to US television. Baudrillard’s juxtaposition of the uncanniness of TV as a medium (‘There is nothing more mysterious than a TV set left on in an empty room’ [1999: 50]) with Halloween as the sinister plotting of

American children makes implicit Gothic connections between them. Crime TV explicitly dramatizes all of the elements flagged up by Baudrillard – the revenge of children on the adult world (as vandals and serial killers), the cultural devotion to children (the investigators who protect children) and the adults who harm them.

‘Boxed In’ tells the story of a young man ritually repeating the abuse he suffered at the hands of his father as punishment for his Halloween pranks. The crime’s set up features a twelve-year-old boy and his friends committing similar pranks. Like much of the discourse around mischief making on Halloween night and Devil’s Night (30 October), relatively harmless hijinks take a sinister turn, as the young boy in ‘Boxed In’ is kidnapped and imprisoned by the serial killer. The sequence in which the young boy is kidnapped draws heavily on the visual conventions of the horror film, with a ‘killer cam’ point of view as the killer stalks his adolescent prey. This is a Halloween Dependant episode, in which the perpetrator’s costume allows him to pass unrecognized among trick-or-treating families. His carefully orchestrated crime is designed to re-live his father’s Halloween punishment. However, his revenge on the adult world, as Baudrillard terms it, becomes revenge on other children and a ritualized self-flagellation by proxy.

CSI: Miami (2002-2012) stages a more typical kind of adolescent mischief in the episode ‘Hell Night’. This is a Halloween Set episode whose personal subplot concerns Ray Caine, Jr. (Alex Buck) (nephew to Lt. Horatio Caine [David Caruso]) caught up with a bad adolescent crowd who accidentally kill a homeless man with their Halloween paint pall pranks. By way of explanation, the seemingly unrepentant Ray Jr. tells his uncle, ‘It was Halloween, we were just messing around’. ‘Hell Night’ hinges upon Halloween as night of criminal intensity associated with adolescents. Its tense atmosphere depends not only on Halloween’s historical association with adolescence and pranking, but is also inextricably tied to the many times in which Halloween pranks have turned both sinister and criminal,

particularly since the 1960s. The arson and race riots that plagued the city of Detroit in the Halloween seasons of the early 1980s are primary examples here and, for the episode of *CSI: Miami* in particular, the 1990 case of a gang of young men and adolescents attacking the homeless in New York on Halloween is a key touch point. As with the urban legends of candy tampering and serial killers, these cases of adolescent criminal activity on Halloween have become key signifiers in crime stories around Halloween, and crime shows capitalize on the unclear boundaries between legend and ‘ripped from the headlines’ realism for their claims to authenticity and their ability to frighten their spectators.

It is significant that the revenge of the children on the adult world in ‘Boxed In’ and ‘Hell Night’ is always aimed at the marginal – other adolescents, the homeless. Thus, two of the key Halloween mythologies Baudrillard references – the revenge on the adult world and the adult world’s retaliation on children through candy poisoning – are not straightforwardly accurate. Rather, they are examples of the types of simulacra that have been closely associated with Baudrillard’s work and with the postmodern celebration of Halloween.

Mischief-making adolescents and sinister children on crime television (and in postfeminist media culture more widely) are shown as the product of bad fathers (in ‘Boxed In’) or absent fathers (in ‘The Good Earth’ or ‘Hell Night’). The good fathers (like Aaron ‘Hotch’ Hotchner [Thomas Gibson], Richard Castle and Seeley Booth [David Boreanaz]) must clean up the mess. Herein lies the struggle of the investigator father who must always sacrifice spending time with his own children in order to protect others. Many sub-plots across *Criminal Minds* Halloween episodes feature the team’s children celebrating the season. The exchange below (from ‘Devil’s Night’) between Hotch and his son Jack (Cade Owens) is typical. Here Hotch waits to see Jack’s Halloween costume, which turns out to be a shirt, tie and suit.

Hotch: Whoa. That is definitely not Spiderman.

Jack: He's not a real Superhero.

Hotch: He's not? Ok. I give up. Who are you supposed to be?

Jack: I'm you, Daddy.

Here the son recognizes the role his investigator father plays as paternal guardian (or Superhero) to other people's children as well as his own. Another personal sub-plot (this time in 'Boxed In') again features Hotch and Jack, following Hotch's quest to find his son a Darth Vader mask to wear for Halloween. He finally obtains the mask from Madame Bouvier, an ambiguously mystical drag queen who approves of Hotch's devotion to his son. 'The world could use more good fathers', Mme Bouvier concludes, and the rest of the episode sees the good father working to undo the legacy of violence and abuse of a bad father – at the expense of joining his son as he trick-or-treats wearing the hard-won Vader mask (see figure 5 below).



Figure 5: Hotch presents his son with the Darth Vader mask

It is significant that Hotch's good fatherhood is expressed through and as consumption. One of the many ways that the good father differs from the bad father is in his ability to safely shepherd his children through the consumption rituals of Halloween. Many times over its history, Halloween has been re-made as consumption ritual in order to empty it of its religious and ritual associations and in order to distance it from the adolescent pranking that has consistently been a part of it. Crime TV's investigator father is a re-confirmation of this transformation and a re-iteration of the tension at the heart of Halloween between horror and nostalgia. Hotch's son can wear the mask his father has bought him and join in Halloween celebrations in a safe way; whereas the working-class serial killer has no such consumptive paternal guidance.

CONCLUSION: LAST EXIT TO HALLOWEENTOWN

If Halloween itself has become televisual, using the urban legend as its key narrative pattern, then contextualizing the festival has become a complicated process of charting interconnected hyperreal histories. Above all, charting the history of Halloween is to draw a cognitive map of nostalgia. The same might be said of Christmas. But where Christmas nostalgia remains locked in a powerful search for the authentic (the true but not necessarily Christian meaning of Christmas), Halloween mixes such restorative nostalgia with the self-aware and intertextual; it plays with fear and celebrates its many forms of mediation. Christmas is no less hyperreal than Halloween, but it is culturally framed by the logic of remediation that seeks to re-invent an authenticity by erasing the traces of its own representation. Halloween, on the other hand, seems to build traces of, and references to, its many simulations into the very fabric of its nostalgia. It is nostalgia for hyperreal meanings of Halloween – whether that is Linus and the Great Pumpkin, the comfort of the pumpkin spice latte, or even Michael Myers' acts of brutal seasonal violence.

In *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, Tim Burton imagines holidays as cities, accessed only through clearly labelled doors in a purgatorial forest (see figure 6 below).



Figure 6: The purgatorial holiday forest in *The Nightmare Before Christmas*

This study of TV's Halloween concludes by offering a formulation of Halloween as a layered geographical place. Burton's Halloweentown is subject to the ups and downs of a tourist village – working towards the busy season, but in uncanny stasis during the low season. This is part of the central set up of Burton's film – Jack Skellington's existential exhaustion at the close of another festive season. Although Halloween as a resort town is an apt metaphor, I would argue that it can be more accurately imagined as a disappearing village or city, such as Brigadoon, whose Gothic timeline only allows it to be visible to the outside world once every one hundred years. Brigadoon is a fictional village carefully staged as a nostalgic pan-Celtic utopia, steeped in mysticism – much as Halloween has been framed, down to its associations with Celtic history. Like Burton's Halloweentown, Brigadoon does not stop existing in between its visible seasons. It keeps functioning whether or not we can see it – as with the eternally available archive of Halloween TV specials that exist on DVD and on platforms

such as YouTube. Brigadoon and Halloweentown exist parallel to our world, but at a different temporal pace that is perfectly suited to the production of seasonal Gothic nostalgia.

When one imagines Halloween as Brigadoon's dark double, it becomes a seasonally visible suburb of the dark city at the heart of the televisual crime genre. It is constructed with low key lit graveyards, inexplicable fog, church-sponsored Hell Houses, demonic sub-cultures and a myriad of cinematic and televisual landmarks and cues (the mad scientist's lair, the *Ghostbusters* [Reitman, 1984] theme song). It is a town populated by children in constant peril, demanding an exhaustive vigilance on the part of parents, in particular fathers. It is television that provides its viewers with legible sign posts for safely navigating Halloweentown and managing its risks and pleasures. Halloweentown, like Jean Baudrillard's formulation of Disneyland, functions as a waste treatment plant for the unfiltered imaginings of American culture (2010: 13).⁵ Crime television's Halloweens dramatize what we are most nostalgic for – our lost childhood experiences of popular and consumer culture – and what we most fear – threats to (and in some sinister cases *from*) our children.

⁵ Nicholas Rogers also makes this connection between Halloween and Baudrillard's formulation of Disneyland – 'Like Disneyland itself, it was becoming "a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation"' (2002: 123).

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